

Testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee
Senate Bill 027 Criminal Procedure – Restorative Justice Program
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My name is Shekhinah Braveheart, Advocacy Associate with the Justice Policy Institute (JPI), a national research and policy organization with expertise on criminal and juvenile justice issues. Over the years, my work has focused on utilizing two decades of JPI's policy and research reports to inform better practices in Maryland's justice system. Please accept this statement in support of *SB 027 Criminal Procedure – Restorative Justice Program*.

Restorative Justice, as a practice and as a policy solution, is uniquely situated to address issues in the justice system as it attempts to repair the harm caused to the victim and encourages behavioral change in offenders. As both, a former victim and ex-offender, I recognize the immediate need for a Restorative Justice Program within the Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services

Currently, the only contact between victim and offender occurs during the sentencing court proceeding. The process consists of a victim describing to a judge, *not* to the offender, the impact of the crime— typically in the context of seeking the harshest sentence possible. Likewise, the offender can express remorse only to the judge, (with his or her back to the victim) and only in the context of seeking a lenient sentence. This dynamic places the focus and power on the “justice system” *not* those impacted by the crime. It further detaches the involved parties from the humanity of the other. The Restorative Justice Program seeks to engage both victims and offenders in a process that:

- Fulfills victim's critical need for acknowledgment, information, privacy, safety, restitution, and involvement in matters of the justice system.
- Facilitates understanding by an offender of the harm caused as a means of providing meaningful change in the behavior of the offender to prevent recidivism.
- Promotes accountability of an offender to a victim and the community for an offense committed, and allows the offender to acknowledge the harm caused to a victim and repair that harm to the extent possible.

Emphasizing acknowledgment of wrongdoing (directly to victims), repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior, and adopting a perspective of *Community Healing* is a foundational step in shifting paradigms around criminal justice in Maryland. It further lays the groundwork for future more holistic reforms. For these reasons, I urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 027.

“People respond in accordance to how you relate to them. If you approach them on the basis of violence, that’s how they will react. But if you say, we want peace, we want stability, we can then do a lot of things that will contribute towards the progress of our society.” ~Nelson Mandela

